

Stephen A. Race House

3945 North Tripp Avenue
Chicago, Illinois

Preliminary Staff Summary of Information

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Commission on Chicago Landmarks
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STEPHEN A. RACE HOUSE
3945 North Tripp Avenue
Chicago, Illinois

Architect: Unknown

Date: circa 1873-74

The Stephen A. Race House is significant in the history of Irving Park, an area located on Chicago's Northwest Side. Built for Stephen A. Race, a brother of Charles T. Race who is the acknowledged founder of Irving Park, it is the only example of a Race home which survives from the first building period of the community. Originally sited on Irving Park Boulevard, a road that was once an Indian trail in early Illinois, the Stephen A. Race House is a brick Italianate structure with its architectural integrity still very much intact. Its style is especially representative of the type of residential dwelling that once lined Irving Park Boulevard in the mid-nineteenth century.

Old Irving Park and Early Chicago History

The rapidity of Chicago's transformation from a primitive frontier outpost to a city with legitimate urban credentials has long been legend in nineteenth century United States history, as Bessie Louise Pierce notes in *A History of Chicago: 1848-1871*:

When Chicago was incorporated as a town in 1833, it was a hamlet of but 350 souls; by mid-century it was a city of nearly thirty thousand. Amazing as this growth was, the increase which took place in the next twenty years was equally so: for by 1870 the population had reached the imposing total of almost three hundred thousand. . . . And beyond the actual limits of the city many people were crowding into suburbs, some of which were, in the last quarter of the century, to become part of Chicago, sharing her economic life and copying or helping to produce the social and cultural patterns of the great midwestern center.

Although a city often noted for its ethnic diversity, Chicago, always cosmopolitan, early attracted not only the foreign-born immigrant but also the native-born American as well. By far, the largest number came from the Old Northwest, the states of Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Michigan, and Wisconsin. From the Middle Atlantic and New England states and the South came the next largest group. Indeed, names today synonymous with Chicago history are rarely found to have been born here but rather sought, and often found, fame and fortune in this vigorous and dynamic young city. Marshall Field, the department store entrepreneur, was from Massachusetts as was Gardner Spring Chapin who with his partner from Georgia, James Jefferson Gore, lent their name to a famous bar and premium bourbon whiskey. Another Southerner was Cyrus McCormick, inventor of the reaper, who hailed from Virginia. Philip D. Armour and Gustavus Swift, who both helped make Chicago the meat-packing capital of the nation, were from the East. William B. Ogden, the city's first mayor, and real estate tycoon Potter Palmer were originally from New York State as was Charles T. Race, the founder of Irving Park, who arrived shortly after the Civil War.

Eventually, with the aid of his brothers and later his sons and grandsons, Charles Race started the Irving Park Land and Building Company which thrived as a real estate concern. Never absentee landlords, the Race family was continuously instrumental in the development of Irving Park. The patriarch Charles T. Race, in fact, donated the three lots on which in 1872 the Dutch Reformed Church and the Society of Irving Park was first housed in a wooden Gothic building. And in a true spirit of entrepreneurship, Charles Race in the very beginning worked out an arrangement with the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad which agreed to service the area, provided a depot was built there. In his *History of Cook County Illinois*, published in 1884, author A. T. Andreas relates the story of Charles Race and Irving Park:

It is near the center of Jefferson Township, on the original Major Noble farm, which was purchased in 1869 by Charles T. Race. Mr. Race's first intention in the purchase of the farm was to engage in farming, but a short time afterward decided to start a town and took into company with him R. T. Race, W. B. Race, John R. Wheeler and John S. Brown.

The young investors correctly sensed that real estate development would prove more lucrative than farming and quickly engaged in subdividing their farm into saleable lots. Spacious in size, the lots were marketed to Chicago's more affluent citizens who desired a more tranquil homelife than would be afforded by residing in or near the constant tumult of the city. From its inception, the founders of this new village had a distinct concept of what it would be like to live in Irving Park. They envisioned a quality of life that was more often associated with the picturesque quietude and family-oriented stability of a small town untainted by the vicissitudes of intense urbanization. Some of the original street names - Rutledge, Greenwood, Prescott, and St. Charles - are evocative of this idyllic theme.

The new village was christened "Irving Park" after the illustrious American au-

thor, Washington Irving, who like the Races was from New York State. Born on April 3, 1783, to a family of early American merchants, Washington Irving first pursued a legal career but eventually achieved literary renown for penning such classics as *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* and *Rip Van Winkle*. He is acknowledged as the first American writer to be well received by the English critics and his work was much admired by the English literary giant, Charles Dickens. He died on November 28, 1859. In point of fact, the first name chosen for this new suburban enclave was "Irvington" but it was discovered that another Illinois town already had adopted that name, so "Irving Park" was elected as an equally viable substitute. Demonstrable pride in the flourishing community was evidenced by the name chosen for the first child born there on August 30, 1869, Irving Park Jones.

By the mid-1870s, the community was well developed, so much so that it drew the favorable attention of a contemporary author. In 1874, Everett Chamberlain, in *Chicago and Its Suburbs*, wrote:

The impression which the visitor to Irving Park receives, on landing at the station of the Northwestern road, is an exceedingly pleasant one. . . . Standing upon the platform of the station . . . he takes in at a glance of the eye some sixty houses of unexceptionally neat pattern, and almost endless variety. The most conspicuous are those of Mr. Charles T. Race . . . and that of the heirs of J. S. Brown, one of the early proprietors, who died lately. Both these houses are of large size, of the Italian villa style of architecture, and, as to material, of red brick. The cost of the Race mansion, with the very elaborate ground improvements now going forward, is about \$20,000; that of the Brown mansion, about \$15,000, the grounds being still comparatively unimproved.

Although the Charles T. Race House is no longer extant, photographs of both the exterior and interior do exist that illustrate that it was indeed a sumptuously appointed mansion in a carefully landscaped setting. Mr. Chamberlain also took note of the construction simultaneously of a house for Charles T. Race's brother, Stephen A., which was being built at a cost of \$12,000. Despite the disparity between what the Race brothers individually spent on their homes, both were men of means and built homes indicative of their stature. Both chose to build in the Italianate mode, then one of the most popular architectural styles.

The Italianate Style and the Stephen Race House

The word Italianate means "Italian in quality or characteristics" and, as an architectural style, it dominated American housing constructed between 1850 and 1880. The Italian or Tuscan villa, as applied to a domestic dwelling, took its cue from the rambling informality of the anonymous farmhouse architecture of rural Italy. By the 1860s, its popularity even surpassed its earlier companion, the Gothic Revival. Its appeal received wide en-

dorment, as Marcus Whiffen illustrates in his *American Architecture 1607-1976*:

The English architect Francis Goodwin pointed out that it permitted 'many freedoms which in a more finished and consistent style would not unjustly incur censure'; the American architect Samuel Sloan wrote that 'the irregular outline' demanded by the Picturesque was 'formed without difficulty,' the 'predominant figure' being the rectangle, of which many 'were introduced and so disposed as to break in upon the other.' It is not surprising that with all these advantages the Italian Villa Style soon became the rival in domestic design of the so much trickier Gothic.

Both the Italianate and Gothic Revival styles had begun in England as part of the Romantic Revival, also called the Picturesque movement, which was a veering away from the formal classical ideals which had for the past two centuries informed all of art and architecture. In the United States, the picturesque was thought to be a suitable, even desirable, alternative to the Greek Revival which gained precedence after the War of 1812 when the young republic, eschewing colonial antecedents, was searching for architectural models appropriate for a practicing democracy. The Italianate was eventually eclipsed by the Queen Anne which came into fashion in the late 1870s when building momentum again picked up after the financial panic of 1873 and subsequent depression.

One of the foremost advocates of the Italianate style was Andrew Jackson Downing, possibly the most successful tastemaker of the mid-nineteenth century. His influence was enormous and derived from the publication of a succession of widely read books. The first, published in 1841 when he was only twenty-six years old, was *A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening Adapted to North America*. In 1845 he produced *The Fruits and Fruit Trees of America*, followed in 1850 by *The Architecture of Country Houses*. The latter became a bible for countless numbers of builders, carpenters, and architects across the United States; it was to go through nine printings and sell well over sixteen thousand copies by the end of the Civil War. Downing had a very clear, readable style. His well-thought-out philosophy of an American ideal lifestyle was coupled with practical schemes for houses and furnishings in and with which the populace could accomplish his goals. *The Architecture of Country Houses* prescribed plans for thirteen cottages, seven farm houses, and fourteen villas.

Downing's life was cut tragically short when in 1852 at the age of thirty-six, he drowned in a steamboat accident. Born on October 13, 1815, in Newburgh, New York, he was married to Caroline DeWindt, a great niece of John Quincy Adams. He first joined his brother Charles in the prosperous family nursery, supplying trees, shrubs, and plants to well-to-do New Yorkers whose estates lined the banks of the Hudson River. Quickly becoming an expert botanist and landscape gardener, he pursued this career simultaneously with that of author and architect. He was commissioned by President Fillmore to supervise the design for the grounds of the Smithsonian Institution and the entire area from the Capitol to the White House. Downing's ideas are also apparent in New York City's Central and Prospect parks; he was an early promulgator of public parks in large cities.

Downing's influence, architecturally, was most pervasive in his native region, the Hudson River area. "Hudson River Bracketed," referring to a projecting roof line decoration particularly favored by Downing, is still used today as a stylistic reference. It became so ubiquitous that it was adopted by the novelist Edith Wharton as a book title.

Reading what Downing had to say about a villa built in the Italian style makes it readily understandable why the first families of Irving Park were apt to select this mode for the design of their first houses. Downing said:

It is however remarkable for expressing the elegant culture and variety of accomplishment of the retired citizen or man of the world, and as it is capable of the most varied and irregular as well as very simple outlines, it is also very significant of the multiform tastes, habits, and wants of modern civilization. On the whole, then, we should say that the Italian style is one that expresses not wholly the spirit of country life nor of town life, but something between both, and which is a mingling of both.

The Stephen A. Race House is a classic example of the Italianate style. Two-and-one-half stories high, composed of red brick contrasted with white stone and painted wood trim, it is derived from the villas of Tuscany in Northern Italy which are characterized by a symmetrical box shape capped by a flat roof. Large eave brackets dominate the cornice line of Italianate houses. On the Race House, these are overscaled, elaborately scrolled, and arranged in pairs. A line of evenly spaced small horizontal brackets called modillions, most common on Italianate Tuscan buildings, is recessed between the larger protruding brackets. Somewhat unique is the way the roof line is broken midpoint by a miniature gable beneath which is a small round window called an oculus. Particularly arresting is the treatment of the windows. Tall and thin, with two-over-two lights, they are emphatically framed with semi-circular arches stamped by a prominent keystone. Round-arched hooded windows are used in the one bay of the house. Although breaking the straightforward configuration of the house as a whole, one or more bay windows were commonplace on almost all mid-Victorian houses.

Today the Stephen A. Race House is nestled securely among the other houses of various vintages that line Tripp Street. To fully appreciate this house it is best to remember that it was moved in 1905 from its original position on Irving Park Boulevard on what was then undoubtedly a more spacious landscaped lot. Hence, it was once in reality a suburban or country house exactly in keeping with Downing's description of what a country house or villa should be. As Downing noted in *The Architecture of Country Houses*:

In our republic there are neither the castles of feudal barons nor the palaces of princes. The President's dwelling is only called 'the White House.' The house in the country which is something beyond a cottage or farmhouse, rises but to the dignity of a villa or mansion. And this word *villa*—the same in Latin, Italian, Spanish, and English, signifies only 'a country house or abode;' or, according to others, 'a rural or country seat.'

plaque says moved in 1924

Downing went on to say:

More strictly speaking, what we mean by a villa, in the United States, is the country house of a person of competence or wealth sufficient to build and maintain it with some taste and elegance.

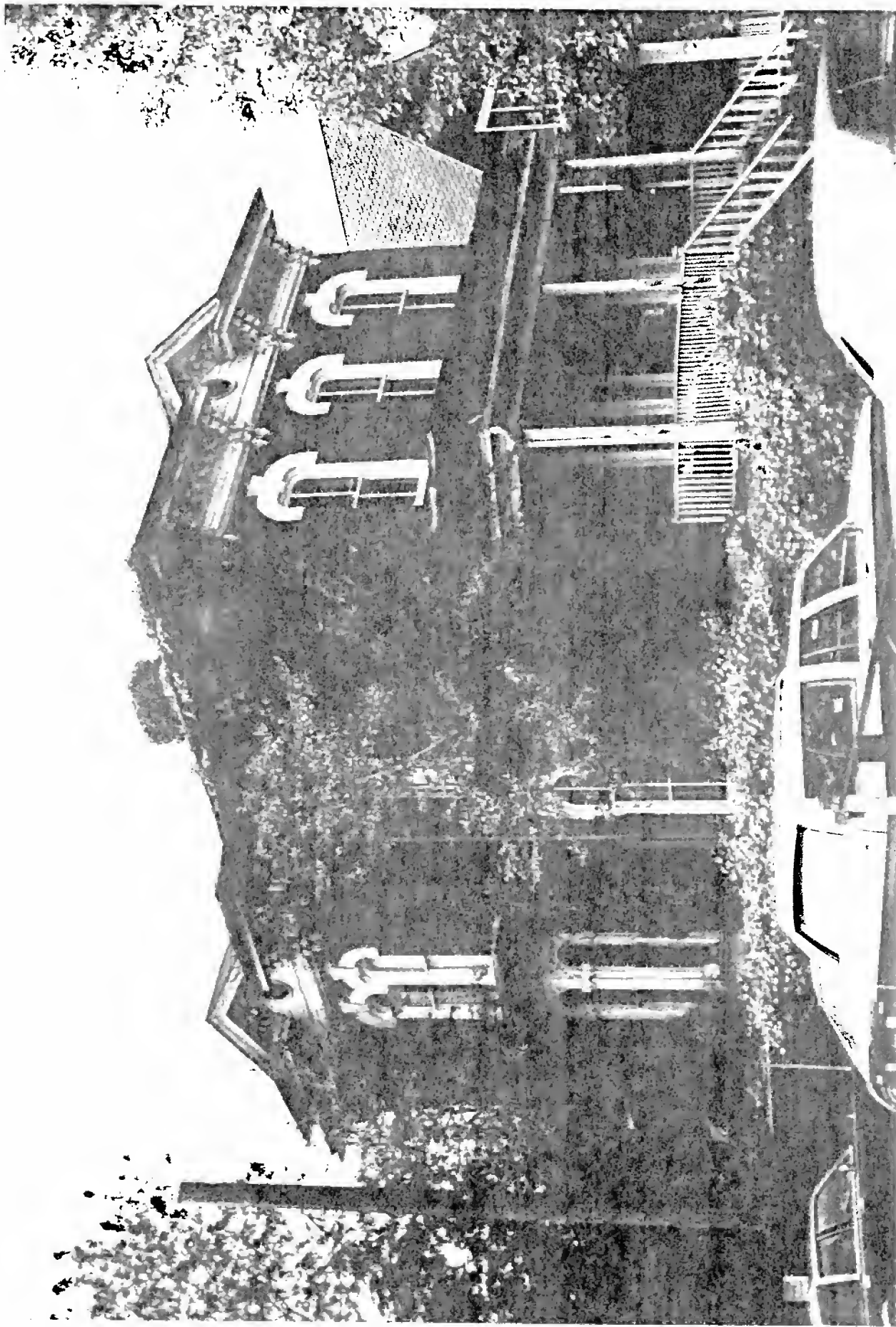
It is therefore in our villas that we must hope in this country to give the best and most complete manifestation of domestic architecture. The cottage is too limited in size, the farmhouse too simply useful in its character, to admit of that indulgence of beauty of form and decoration which properly belongs to the villa.

The Stephen A. Race House certainly fits Downing's definition of what is meant by a villa and certainly its first occupant met Downing's standard for a villa owner.

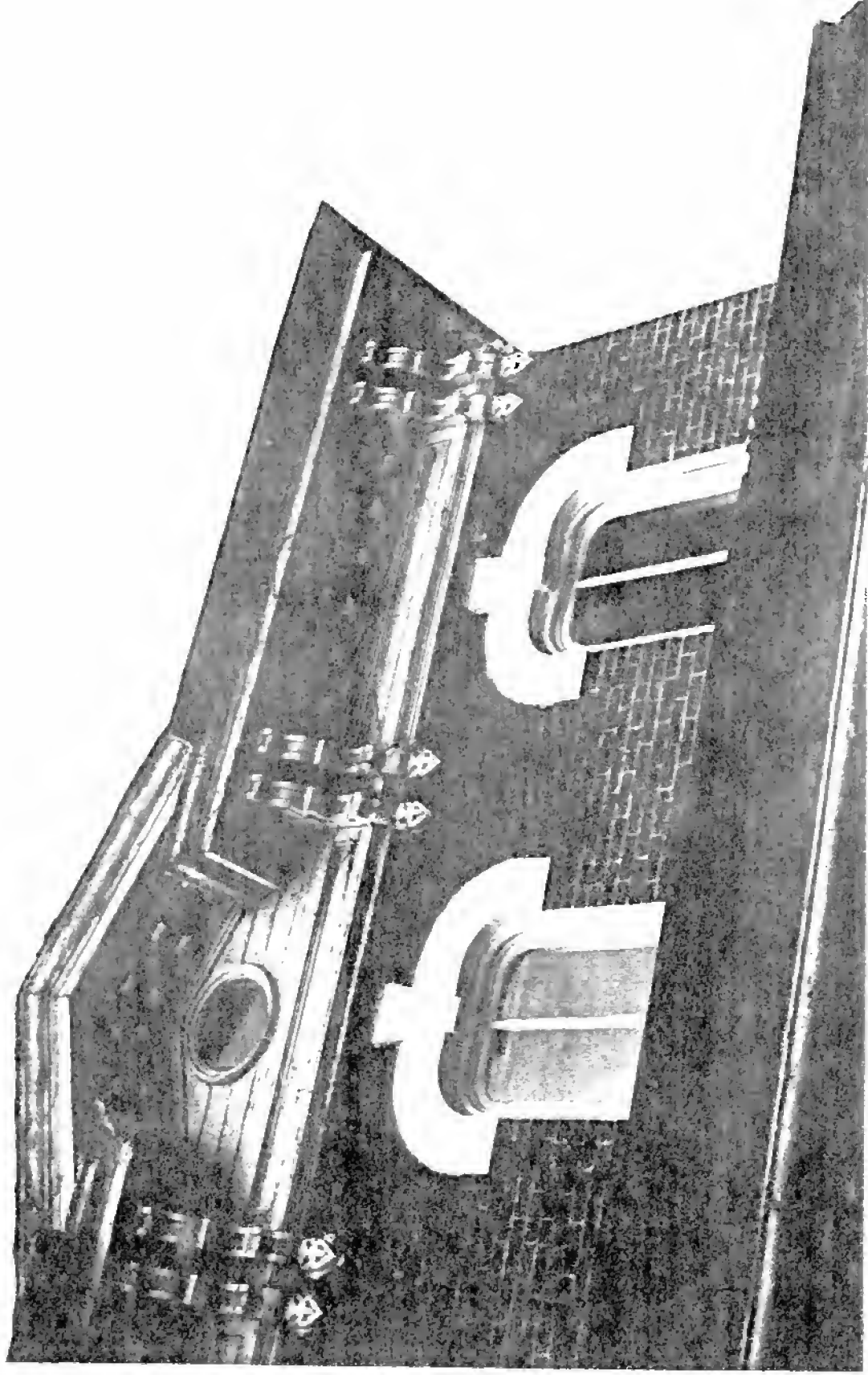
Irving Park continued to expand during the 1870s and 1880s with an influx of residents and a number of homes built especially after the Chicago Fire of 1871. Annexation to the city, as a part of the whole Jefferson Township in 1889, brought some necessary infrastructure improvements such as paved streets, adequate sewers, and more electric and telephone lines. But while now nominally Chicagoans, the citizens still thought of themselves as "from Irving Park," not Chicago. The strong bonds forged by local church, school, social, and charitable activities were already firmly established. Annexation had little real impact on this self-contained community, as the *Irving Park Historical Society Newsletter* (February, 1987) recalled:

For at least twenty five years following annexation, Chicago newspapers continued to print Irving Park news items within their suburban sections. Society pages outlined the activities of Irving Park's social elite as though the area was still distinct from other parts of the city. Even newspapers local to Jefferson Township carried numerous articles in reference to 'Irving Park, Illinois.'

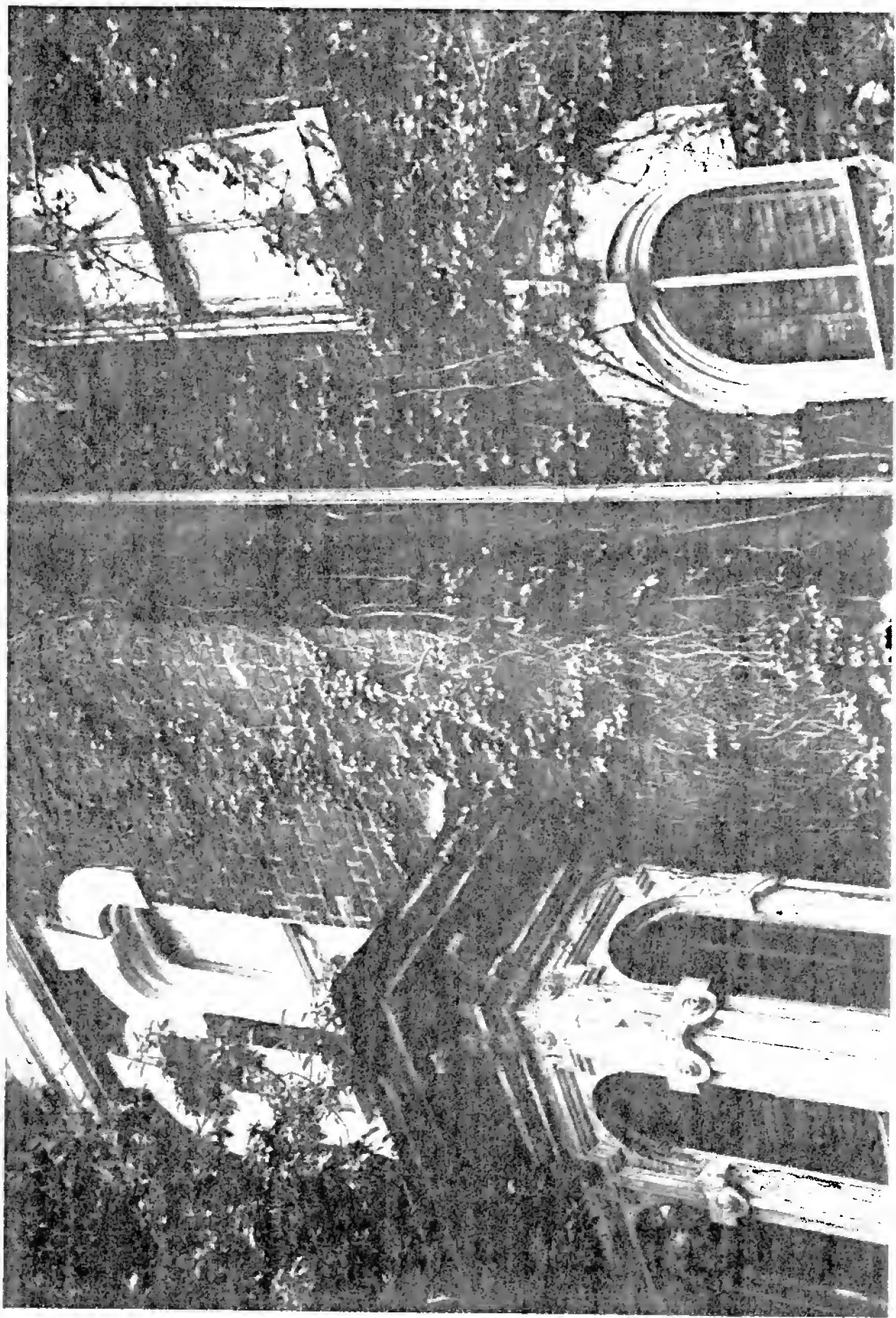
Irving Park in the 1980s continues to exhibit justifiable pride in its own unique identity. An active and thriving historical society has defined an Old Irving Park neighborhood (bounded by Pulaski, Montrose, Addison, and the Chicago Milwaukee Railroad tracks) and is working to document and preserve the rich heritage of this area. The Stephen A. Race House, with its historical ties to the community and its exemplary Italianate architecture, is one of the most significant among the collection of Old Irving Park houses that constitute an important legacy of the City of Chicago.



Built for Stephen A. Race, a brother of Charles T. Race who is the acknowledged founder of Irving Park, the House at 3945 North Tripp Avenue is the only example of a Race home which survives from the first building period of the community. (Bob Begolka, photographer)



Large eye brackets dominate the cornice line of Italianate houses. On the Stephen A. Race House, these are elaborately scrolled and arranged in pairs. (Rob Regalke, photographer)



The vivid window treatment on the Stephen A. Race House adds character and definition to the facade.
(Bob Regolka, photographer)

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The Race family touted the advantages of living in Irving Park in this 1874 advertisement.
(Courtesy of Irving Park Historical Society)



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